
BOOK REVIEWS

***Specimens of Mediaeval Hebrew Scripts, vol. 3: Ashkenazic Script.* Compiled by Edna Engel and Malachi Beit-Arié. Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2017 (The Hebrew Palaeography Project). (סז), XLVI pages, 202 plates. ISBN 978-965-208-187-2**

Hebrew [1] codicology (and Hebrew palaeography as its part) is perhaps the youngest scholarly discipline among the auxiliary sciences in Jewish Studies. Yet, owing first of all to the Hebrew Palaeography Project of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, it keeps conquering new heights and becomes increasingly vital for the ever-growing circle of Medieval Studies specialists. The best indicator of the discipline's development is the demand for various workshops in palaeography that are conducted with unfailing success both in Israel and in universities and libraries of Europe and America. This can be attributed, mainly, to the fact that today's scholars are no longer satisfied with mere printed editions of old manuscripts, turning more and more frequently to primary sources.

The Hebrew Palaeography Project — undoubtedly, the leader of the contemporary codicology and palaeography — has developed a codicological database named SfarData that is currently the most up-to-date tool for any researcher in the field of the Hebrew palaeography and codicology. Not to go into detail, it should be recalled that the Hebrew codicology elaborated two formal criteria for assessment of medieval manuscripts: the region of origin and the handwriting style (script).

According to the classification of the Hebrew Palaeography Project, the world of the medieval Hebrew manuscripts is divided into five geo-cultural zones [2]: Orient, Sepharad, Ashkenaz, Italy, and Byzantium.

All varieties of handwriting styles can be conventionally narrowed down to three groups: square script, semi-cursive script, and cursive script.

One of the most wanted tools for a researcher in the field is a kind of Thesaurus that would present all varieties of Hebrew manuscripts both by region and in chronological order [3]. *Specimens of Mediaeval Hebrew Scripts* is an ongoing project for publishing precisely that sort of Thesaurus: the structure of the publication fol-

lows the system of geo-cultural zones described above. The first volume is devoted to the Oriental region and its sub-region Yemen; the second volume deals with the region of Sefarad [4].

Now we have the long-awaited third volume, devoted to the region of Ashkenaz [5]. It contains 202 plates that reflect the diversity of the scribal styles practiced in the Ashkenazic culture from the mid-12th until the mid-16th century. It is a point of interest that the volume opens with a printed font sample of a tombstone inscription from the Würzburg Jewish cemetery, dated by 1153/4 (plate 1), but the rest of the samples present already scripts proper. Each sample is accompanied by a text, both in Hebrew and English. The texts are unified and structured as follows: the year of a manuscript's copy, the place of copying, the description of the script, the name of the scribe and the purpose of copying (if it is named in the manuscript) [6], the title of the work(s), the name of the author and, finally, the manuscript's current holding and its shelf mark. In certain cases, additional codicological information is provided [7]. It is important to note that the number of the presented plates does not coincide with the number of the manuscripts included in the album. One manuscript may have employed two different scripts, which would place it into two different sections; alternatively, a manuscript may have been copied by different scribes and thus, be represented by several plates [8] in the album. In addition to the brief description of each manuscript, the reader is provided with all variants of all written letters occurring on a given folio (or sometimes, more broadly, in a given manuscript).

The collection of plates is preceded by two articles, both in Hebrew and English. It is a general preface to the album ("Introduction") by Malachi Beit-Arié (pp. VII—XV and pp. ז—יב in Hebrew Section) and "Remarks on the Ashkenazic Script" by Edna Engel (pp. XVII—XLIV and pp. יג—לז in Hebrew Section.) In his article, Prof. Beit-Arié — the founder and permanent head of the Hebrew Palaeography Project — offers general guidelines for working with the album: he explains the structure of the descriptions, specifies the terms used in the volume and, inter alia, explicates why the material has been divided into two sections by script: (i) square script

and (ii) semi-cursive / cursive script (joined together). The other article, by the senior palaeographer of the Hebrew Palaeography Project Dr. Edna Engel, offers a rather elaborated analysis of the genesis and development of the Ashkenazic script. It is worth noting, that the article is supplied with six palaeographic tables that serve as an excellent illustration to the matters discussed by the author. The titles of the tablets say it best: Table 1. Square Scripts: Regional Styles (13th Century); Table 2. Square Scripts: Genres (Germany, 13th Century); Table 3. Consolidation of the Square Script towards the 13th Century; Table 4. Chronological Development of the Square Script; Table 5. Semi-Cursive Script: Genres (Thirteenth Century); Table 6. Cursivization.

Engel starts her article with a statement that the style of Ashkenazic scripts depended directly on the scribes' choice of the writing tool. She writes:

The unique character of the writing texture and the crafting of the letters are facilitated by use of the quill pen (or bone stylus), the writing instrument of the Ashkenazic letter. The flexible quill, as opposed to the stiffer reed, increases the possibilities for creating delicate elements such as fine lines or ornate embellishments to beautify the basic letter lines (p. XVII).

As a matter of fact, there is nothing new in this statement: it is repeated virtually every time the Ashkenazic writing style is being discussed. Quite recently in a private conversation, a professional Ashkenazi *soifer* [9] who was sharing his insights about respective capabilities of the reed pen and the goose quill pen, insisted on undeniable advantages of the latter, comparing the difference between the two with that between a balalaika

and a violin... Studying the plates of this volume, however, has unexpectedly brought me to a discovery that is likely to call for a reconsideration of the above postulate regarding the direct correlation between the shape of the letters and the scribes' choice of the writing tool. The plate 54 demonstrates two scripts (square and semi-cursive ones) from a manuscript copied by a scribe named Shalom Zaksha (?) (Hebr. זכשא), in Görlitz (Saxony) in the year 1387. A sample folio (159 v) is presented in the Section "Square Script". This script is used in the manuscript only in the scribe's colophon. Being loyal to my long-standing habit of reading all colophons, I skimmed through this text as well, and was simply overwhelmed. The scribe tells us unequivocally, that for his copy he was using precisely a reed pen — *u-ve-kulmos shel kane nisrat* ("and inscribed with a pen of reed"). And yet, his script is Ashkenazic par excellence! It appears that the compilers of the album have overlooked the scribe's confession, but I'll repeat that it requires a thorough analysis!

In summary, the researchers of Medieval Hebrew manuscripts copied in the geo-cultural zone of Ashkenaz, have acquired an exceptionally important reference tool that will help them localize and date manuscripts *sine loco et anno* as well as correctly read Ashkenazic semi-cursive and cursive scripts that are not always easily decipherable.

In conclusion, I would like to wish the authors of this volume and other contributors to the Hebrew Palaeography Project to complete this book series. I am looking forward to seeing the volumes devoted to the geo-cultural zones of Italy and Byzantium.

Sh. Iakerson

Notes

1. According to the methodology of the discipline, Hebrew manuscripts are defined as any manuscripts in any language as long as they are written in Hebrew characters. Thus, for instance, the most important collections among the Hebrew manuscript holdings in St. Petersburg (the Russian National Library and Institute of Oriental Manuscripts at the Russian Academy of Sciences [Asiatic Museum]) are manuscripts written in the Judeo-Arabic language. The year 1540 has been chosen to represent the *terminus ante quem* for the Medieval period, as it applies to Jewish book history. Any manuscripts copied after 1540 are not included in the database of the Hebrew Palaeography Project.

2. Geo-cultural zones defined by distinct Hebrew scribal traditions were formulated by Beit-Arié, 1981: 17.

3. As a matter of fact, such a Thesaurus, indeed, exists for Hebrew incunabula: Freimann & Marx (eds.), 1924—1931: 1—8.

4. Beit-Arié, Engel & Yardeni (comp.), 1987; Beit-Arié & Engel (comp.), 2002.

5. According to the classification of the Hebrew Palaeography Project, it includes Central and Northern France, Germany and England. For later periods, Eastern Europe can be incorporated as well.

6. In other words, it can either contain the name of the person who ordered the copy or indicate that the manuscript was copied for the scribe's own use.

7. The information may concern the material of the manuscript (paper or parchment) and / or the number of the scribes involved in copying of the given manuscript.

8. See, for example MS Mich. 521 from Bodleian Library, Oxford, that is introduced via three plates: Nos. 54, 136 and 137.

9. *Soifer* (Hebr. "סופר") — a copyist of sacred texts in Judaism.

References

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